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Stuffing the Short Story with Context: Artistic Creation and Gender in H.G. Wells's "The Triumphs of a Taxidermist"

Zoé Hardy

1 "The Triumphs of a Taxidermist" appeared in *The Pall Mall Gazette* in March 1894. In this plotless and particularly short short story, H.G. Wells depicts a nameless taxidermist driven by the peculiar ambition to recreate extinct species or chimeras in order to compete with nature. In a speech infused with pride, he explains to first-person narrator Bellows how he successfully tricks the scientific world into believing in the authenticity of his creations. The narrative set-up of the story resembles that of an interviewer obtaining information from a famous person. This, in combination with the detailed information about taxidermy and the absence of the author's name, creates the impression of a journalistic piece on taxidermy. This impression is further reinforced when the story is read in its original publication context in *The Pall Mall Gazette*, amidst other non-fiction essays and journalism. In that context, the original subtitle of the story, "A Confidential Conversation," resonates with the titles of neighbouring pieces in the magazine, such as "The Art of Map-Making: A Visit to the Ordnance Survey Department" which was printed on the same page. On adjacent pages, further, Wells's short story figures next to advertisements for books as well as cleaning products.

2 The original periodical publication context of "The Triumphs of a Taxidermist," with its mixture of fiction and non-fiction, journalism, interviews and advertisements thus influences the reception of the text, as the story is more likely to be read as a piece of journalism in this setting than when it appears in a collection of stories. At the same time, as Dean Baldwin has pointed out, the periodical market also had an influence on the production and development of the short story in the late nineteenth century. For Baldwin, the genre of the short story developed alongside journalism—which "rather

than fiction was the staple of the ordinary writer throughout most of the nineteenth century"—to become "an economically or aesthetically successful genre" in the 1880s (9). Baldwin has also underlined the fact that "magazines and newspapers provided new outlets for writers of all kinds, and the gradual discovery that fiction was a popular commodity eventually created a huge demand for short fiction and serialized novels" (5).

3 H.G. Wells successfully took advantage of this new market to launch his career as a writer. He famously described his periodical fiction as his "bread and cheese" (qtd. in Hammond 13). John Hammond discusses Wells's collaboration with *The Pall Mall Gazette* as follows:

> In the early months of the year [1894] four of his stories appeared in the *Pall Mall Gazette*, *Truth* and *St James's Gazette*: "The Man with a Nose," "A Family Elopement," "In the Modern Vein" and "The Triumphs of a Taxidermist." . . . All are written in the light, whimsical manner fashionable at the time and it is apparent that he was emulating styles and themes which seemed likely to be acceptable to editors: "I was doing my best to write as other writers wrote," he commented on this phase of his career. "We were as bright and witty as we knew how, and acceptance, proofs and a cheque followed as a matter of course." (11)

4 Hammond further explains that Wells also regularly published journalistic pieces in *The Pall Mall Gazette* on topics as diverse as "angels, dreams, fashion, skating, lodging-house keepers, gravestones, cricket, toothache, riding a tricycle, catching a cold" (10). In these pieces, Wells shows himself very much aware of current debates, new scientific developments and current fashions. Yet, this responsiveness to contemporary discourses and developments can also be found in his short fiction.

5 "The Triumphs of a Taxidermist" in particular is very topical as it deals with questions of art, creation and gender that were hotly debated at the time. The story essentially deals with a man's sense of accomplishment through artistic creation. It is presented in a discontinuous manner through a one-sided dialogue that zooms in on the taxidermist's speech. The narrator's questions are not displayed in the text, but his reactions are reflected in the taxidermist's answers: "'Unpleasant? I don't see it'" (22); "'No, I don't think I ought to tell you that" (23). Because Bellows's questions and comments are omitted, the taxidermist's discourse effectively becomes a monologue, which makes him the focal point of the story. Interestingly, the taxidermist remains nameless, which suggests that his identity is entirely defined by his practice, and more specifically by how and what he creates.

6 The idea of defining oneself or one's purpose in life on the basis of one's creative potential brings us straight to the heart of late-Victorian debates about art and gender, creation and procreation. According to the traditional Victorian ideology, men were blessed with creative and artistic genius, whereas women's destiny lay in procreation. Thus, while "authentic culture remains the prerogative of men" during the Victorian era, women's generative power was considered to be limited to that of procreation (Huyssen 47). As women started to question this traditional separation of spheres and its attendant gender roles at the end of the nineteenth century, the "natural" binaries and dichotomies of gender came to be insisted upon even more firmly. Indeed, the emergence of the figure of the New Woman in the last two decades of the nineteenth century and the intensification of women's rights movements caused considerable anxiety as gender roles were felt to be in mutation. For Ann Heilmann, the New Woman "epitomized the spirit of the fin de siècle" and embodied a "vibrant metaphor of

transition," the "harbinger of cultural, social and political transformations" (1). In *Manliness and Masculinities in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, historian John Tosh notes that "the phenomenon of the New Woman released a great deal of status anxiety on the part of men, particularly in the lower middle and middle classes," and as a result, "the dominant reaction was to re-affirm sexual difference."

7 Claudia Nelson observes that the Woman Question inevitably also entailed a redefinition of motherhood and of the role of the mother in society:

> To the Victorians, the real concern was the Mother Question. The danger of the superfluous woman, the fallen woman, and the New Woman, who might be cut off from matrimony by population imbalance, sexual mores, or even choice, was less their numbers than their possession of a natural power that, lacking its proper outlet of bearing and rearing children, might break through the social structure at any point. (13)

8 This renewed interest in the maternal arose from essentialist perceptions of women, who were "defined by maternity, actual or potential," but whose responsibility progressively transgressed the domestic sphere to encompass the well-being of the nation (Nelson 2; 13). As Nelson has pointed out, this ideal of motherhood was frequently advertised in the periodical press, which reasserted the role of the "maternal genius" by praising "women's greater sensitivity, morality, and capacity for emotion" (13; 16). The widespread belief that such qualities were the essential properties of women formed the premise of women's association with—and limitation to—childbearing and childrearing.

9 At the same time, the paternal role in the late-Victorian period became "weak, ambiguous, and fraught with conflict" (Nelson 4). In *Gender and Fatherhood in the Nineteenth Century*, Trev Lynn Broughton and Helen Rogers observe that "as the cultural resonance of the paternal role declined, and as feminist challenges to male power increased, the custom of automatically yielding to the paterfamilias as the head of the household waned" (Broughton and Rogers 7). Nathalie McKnight links the weakening of paternal authority to transformations in the Victorian cultural scene:

> Into this authority vacuum, the arts rush in, offering their subjective but undeniably effective windows into the nature of the self, the workings of the mind, the needs of the human heart, and the strategies for best dealing with one another, whether at home or in society. Perhaps the great burgeoning of authorship in the nineteenth century, the golden age of the novel, is in part due to a reaction against this loss of authority on so many fronts. Traditional sources of authority were on the wane, but authorship was on the rise. Faced with the dwindling of faith in God the father, government authorities, and biological fathers, Victorians increasingly took to creating their own worlds where they could reign as the undisputed authority. (McKnight 8)

10 In the same vein, Elaine Showalter has argued that "one defense against the mother's reign is to appropriate her power by repressing the maternal role in procreation and creation, and replacing it with a fantasy of self-fathering" (77-78). In *Sexual Anarchy,* Showalter defines self-fathering as the depiction of motherless births which sought to undermine natural conception in favour of intellectual and/or artistic production (78).

11 The trope of asexual procreation had of course existed in literature well before the late nineteenth century: Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), E.T.A Hoffman's "The Sandman" (1817) and Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Rappaccinni's Daughter" (1844) are among the most famous representations of this trope. Similarly, a number of classical myths also employed the trope of male self-creation: in Greek mythology, Zeus alone gives birth to

Athena and Dionysus, who respectively come out of his skull and thigh; Pygmalion animates the statue he sculpted after falling in love with it; while in Christian mythology, Eve is created from Adam's rib. Nevertheless, as Showalter observes, "fantasies of male self-creation . . . reemerged with a peculiar virulence in the 1880s": "In numerous texts, male writers imagined fantastic plots involving alternative forms of male reproduction or self-replication . . . These enterprises are celibate, yet procreative metaphors for male self-begetting. They reject natural paternity for fantastic versions of fatherhood" (78).

12 In Wells's story, the taxidermist's ability to accomplish himself through his creative powers is clear. Throughout the story, he explains to Bellows "how he concocted a most attractive mermaid," and how he invented "'new kinds of humming birds, and very beautiful little things'" (Wells 24). These "'great inventions,'" as he calls them, are his triumph, since they come out of his own imagination (Wells 24). This creative prowess contributes to his feelings of superiority, which is underlined throughout the story by a series of claims such as: "'There never was a man who could stuff like me, Bellows, never'" (Wells 22). The assertion of his signature as sole creator of his art is further stressed by means of italics in the text: "'one of the *genuine* great auks *was made by me*'" (Wells 23, emphasis in the original). Moreover, the repetition of words from the semantic field of creation draws attention to the taxidermist's creative power ("'made,'" "'created,'" "'*forge*,'" "'New'"). By presenting taxidermy as an artistic and creative practice, Wells employs an important aspect of the trope of male self-creation, namely the valorisation of autonomous and artificial conception.

13 The taxidermist's creative power is also explicitly linked to his status as an artist: he considers himself "'a real artist in the art'" and calls his work "'a masterpiece'" (Wells 24). To him, taxidermy is not a craft but a superior artistic practice. As an artist, the taxidermist also belongs to the Ivory Tower tradition, which "exalts art above life and insists that the artist can make use of life only if he stands aloof" (Beebe 13). His room is described by the narrator as a "noisome den" (Wells 22) and the taxidermist himself has an appropriately peculiar and eccentric appearance:

> . . . he kept his feet—on which he wore, after the manner of sandals, the holy relics of a pair of carpet slippers—out of the way upon the mantel piece, among the glass eyes. And his trousers . . . were a most horrible yellow plaid, such as they made when our fathers wore side-whiskers and there were crinolines in the land. Further, his hair was black, his face rosy, and his eye a fiery brown; and his coat was chiefly of grease upon a basis of velveteen. And his pipe had a bowl of china showing the Graces, and his spectacles were always askew, the left eye glaring nakedly at you, small and penetrating; the right, seen through a glass darkly, magnified and mild. (Wells 22)

14 Here, the taxidermist is portrayed as an artist by means of a colour palette ("most horrible yellow," "black," "rosy," "brown") which evokes the theme of painting and visual art. By choosing bland tones, Wells efficiently depicts the gruesome atmosphere surrounding his protagonists and at the same time foreshadows the taxidermist's macabre discourse and practice. The repetition of the word "and" creates an effect of enumeration, and the taxidermist appears as a compilation of various nuances recalling his own artistic compositions. Further, Bellows's reference to a past era of "side-whiskers" and "crinolines" indicates the temporal distance separating the taxidermist from contemporary society and reinforces the image of the artist disconnected from the real world.

15 At the end of the nineteenth century, the connection between men's reassertion of their creative power and women's confinement to the realm of procreation was also tied up with the bigger question of art's representation of life. Indeed, ten years prior to the publication of "The Triumphs of a Taxidermist," critics and writers addressed this issue in a debate on "The Art of Fiction," where Walter Besant advocated realism as a pledge of quality in literature: "First, and before everything else, there is the Rule that everything in Fiction which is invented and is not the result of personal experience and observation is worthless" (17-18). For him, fiction aimed to "portray humanity and human character," and actions that "must be natural and consistent" (18). A few months later, Henry James responded with an essay partially supporting Besant's views, in which he stated that fiction should be an "illusion of life" and should replicate "the air of reality" by means of "exactness" and "truth of detail" (66). While James questioned the rigidity of Besant's rules ("He seems to me to mistake in attempting to say so definitely beforehand what sort of an affair the good novel will be"), he nonetheless agreed on the idea that fiction should aspire to resemble life: "The only reason for the existence of a novel is that it *does* compete with life" (60; 54, emphasis in the original).

16 Following James's publication, Robert Louis Stevenson expressed a divergent opinion in an essay entitled "A Humble Remonstrance" in which he repudiated the notion of competition between art and life: "No art—to use the daring phrase of Mr. James—can successfully 'compete with life'; and the art that seeks to do so is condemned to perish *montibus aviis*" (171). Rather, Stevenson argued that

> to compete with the flavour of wine, the beauty of the dawn, the scorching of fire, the bitterness of death and separation—here is, indeed, a projected escalade of heaven; here are, indeed, labours for a Hercules in a dress coat, armed with a pen and a dictionary to depict the passions, armed with a tube of superior flake-white to paint the portrait of the insufferable sun. (172)

17 Stevenson believed that life was too complex to be reproduced in art, and viewed art and life as antithetical entities; while he defined the former as "neat, finite, self-contained, rational, flowing and emasculate," he described the latter as "monstrous, infinite, illogical, abrupt and poignant" (174). As Scott Hames notes, "the fault of James's realism is not stylistic but constitutive: it presupposes a domesticated sense of life and then pretends to boldly, intrepidly reproduce it" (65). For Stevenson, "the novelist's role is not to reproduce impressions of actual life but to create a textual experience that makes fantasy real" (Hames 66). Thus, Stevenson encouraged writers to explore horizons hinging on "a simplification of some side or point of life" and on the emancipation of their imagination from the constraints of reality (181).

18 Showalter has linked the *fin de siècle* divergence from mid-Victorian realism to the gendered creative/procreative dichotomy that was reinforced at the time, where men, creation and art opposed women, procreation and nature:

> The disappearance of the three-decker suggested a movement away from subjects, themes, and forms associated with femininity and maternity. . . . The three-part structure dictated a vision of human experience as linear, progressive, causal, and tripartite, ending in marriage or death. When there were no longer three volumes to fill, writers could abandon the temporal structures of beginning, middle, and end, and the procreative and genealogical fables of inheritance, marriage, and death that had been traditionally associated with women writers and Victorian realism. Instead, fin-de-siècle narrative questioned beliefs in endings and closures, as well as in marriage and inheritance. (17-18)

19 Popular literary subgenres such as fantasy, adventure tales and scientific romances became breeding grounds for the motif of male self-creation. By generating imaginative frames that no longer relied on realism, male authors were able to stage protagonists who could recreate themselves through their own actions rather than through the real-life patterns of marriage and domesticity. If escaping realism also meant escaping plots revolving around the domestic, characters could be given an autonomy of action that frequently served their creative purposes.

20 This detachment from real life clearly appears in "The Triumphs of a Taxidermist," as transcending nature is central to the main protagonist's project. Numerous times in his monologue, the taxidermist claims that artificial or artistic creation is more valuable than natural conception: "'. . . all this is merely imitating Nature. I have done more than that in my time. I have—beaten her.' . . . 'I have created birds,' . . . '*New* birds. Improvements'" (Wells 23-24). The new species he creates are, to him, worth more than the creations of Mother Nature: "'I have rivalled the hands of Nature herself'" (Wells 23). He goes as far as using the expression "'Enrich the universe'" to describe the purpose of his creations (Wells 24). His art thus embodies a fantasy of self-creation where his sole imaginative power surpasses what nature has to offer. On many levels, "The Triumphs of a Taxidermist" thus seems to resonate with Showalter's statement that "in the male writing of the fin de siècle, celibate male creative generation was valorized, and female powers of creation and reproduction were denigrated" (78). The taxidermist creates imaginative species that he believes to be superior to the ones resulting from a natural conception. His deliberate subversion of nature can be seen as a belittlement of maternal endowments in a competition that opposes art to life, as illustrated by the use of words such as "'beaten,'" "'Improvements,'" "'higher,'" and "'rivalled.'" Hence, the taxidermist's artificial creations contrast with natural begetting in a way seemingly praising the former and undermining the latter.

21 In order to compete with nature, the taxidermist resorts to duplicitous strategies. The idea of fraud often permeates both the taxidermist's speech and Bellows's narration: the latter refers to his interlocutor's creations as "bogus stuffed birds," and underlines the taxidermist's confidential tone as he delivers the secrets of his dishonest art (Wells 24). For his part, the taxidermist repeatedly exposes the falsehood of his practice: "'My dear fellow, half the great auks in the world are about as genuine as the handkerchief of Saint Veronica, as the Holy Coat of Treves'" (Wells 23). After mentioning the empty bird he once created ("'there was really nothing in it; a thoroughly empty bird—except for stuffing'"), the taxidermist goes on to tell the story of a collector "swearing he would have a specimen of a bird that did not exist, that never had existed," and how he provided it for him (Wells 24). Wells's main protagonist also explains how he fabricates fake eggs:

> "Yes, we make them out of fine porcelain. I tell you it is worth while. . . . It is very fine work, and afterwards you have to get them dusty, for no one who owns one of these precious eggs has the temerity to clean the thing. That's the beauty of the business. Even if they suspect an egg they do not like to examine it too closely." (23)

22 These eggs, symbols of the taxidermist's paternal power over his creations, imply that the female role in the reproduction and gestation process is perfectly replaceable and reproducible by art and imagination. However, the dust added upon them acts as a reminder that this paternity is only fraudulent, and that a deceitful veil is essential to cover his trick.

23 Once the fraud is concealed, the taxidermist's glory hinges on the scientific recognition he obtains through the publication of articles on his creations, as Bellows points out at the end of the story:

> . . . so far as great auks' eggs, and the bogus stuffed birds are concerned, I find that he has the confirmation of distinguished ornithological writers. And the note about the New Zealand bird certainly appeared in a morning paper of unblemished reputation, for the Taxidermist keeps a copy and has shown it to me. (25)

24 This insertion of fiction into the real world mirrors Wells's own practice of writing. As John Huntington underlines in *Science Fiction: A Critical Guide*, "The Taxidermist, like the writer of scientific romances, generates an alternative fictional world which infiltrates the real one and which thereby generates the 'pure joy' of the friction of ironic juxtaposition" (37). By pointing out the publication of his character's fraudulent creations in a "paper of unblemished reputation," Wells draws attention to the publication of his own fictional story in *The Pall Mall Gazette*. As a result, "The Triumphs of a Taxidermist" can be read as a play on truth and lies, a *mise en abyme* of fiction within fiction occurring on three levels: the taxidermist attempts to deceive his audience—scientists—into believing in the authenticity of his creations; Bellows, in his position as a witness narrator, tries to convince his readers of the veracity of his tale ("The reader unacquainted with the dark ways of the collector may perhaps be inclined to doubt my taxidermist"); and Wells, by publishing his story in a magazine, amidst advertisements and non-fiction texts, further adds to the story's hybrid status between fact and fiction (24).

25 The construction of imaginary tales or images is, in fact, a significant theme in the story. It is shaped by a number of parallels between the practice of taxidermy and that of writing fiction in Wells's narrative, resulting in a mirroring effect between the author and his protagonist. By attributing new purposes to taxidermy, Wells exposes a number of artistic and aesthetic strategies which he had to employ himself to write his story. For instance, fragmentation structures the taxidermist's creations and Wells's narrative in equal manner: both are the sum of disconnected entities combined to materialise a product of their imagination. Taxidermy, for its part, is inherently an art of fragmentation, as it consists in disassembling bodies in order to stuff them. This appears in the story with the lexical field of body parts: "glass eyes," "dried bits of skins," "skeletons," "feathers" (22, 23, 24). The narrator's name, Bellows, can also be read as a pun on "bowels," another isolated part of the body. At the same time, fragmentation materialises in the fact that only one side of the dialogue is given. Altogether, the gaps created by fragmentation highlight the taxidermist's unreliability, as they are a persistent reminder that the taxidermist might not be telling the whole story. This play on trustworthiness is established from the first lines of the story, when the narrator situates their conversation "between the first glass of whisky and the fourth, when a man is no longer cautious and yet not drunk" (Wells 22).

26 These fragments are gathered after a process of selection which both the practice of writing and taxidermy employ in order to produce a brief and finite piece of art. In the narrative, Wells's strategic choices occur on several levels. First, the story starts *in medias res* instead of presenting a detailed exposition: "Here are some of the secrets of taxidermy. They were told me by the taxidermist in a mood of elation" (22). Secondly, Wells uses a first-person narrator, thus avoiding the need to introduce or describe an additional character. Moreover, the author includes very few narrative descriptions to punctuate the taxidermist's discourse, aside from rare indications: "He suddenly

became silent" (23); "He resumed his attitude during an impressive silence" (24). Nonetheless, Wells's use of selection and ellipsis still allows him to articulate his story in a clear manner, by displaying only essential information to feed his narrative. Likewise, his taxidermist conforms to the constraints of selection by carefully crafting his creations with specific materials: "'I made it out of the skeletons of a stork and a toucan and a job lot of feathers'" (24). Just like Wells, his artistic medium is by nature restrictive and requires an economy of means to fit the aesthetic codes governing the rules of its practice; the taxidermist knows what message—or image—he wants to convey, and to do so, needs to thoroughly select the elements shaping his composition.

27 As a result, this selection of fragments helps reach a single effect: in taxidermy, it is the pose of the stuffed animal; in the case of Wells's short story, it is Poe's "single effect" which aims to impress the reader. Each practice aims to deliver a unique yet complex effect, contained in a concentrated form. This is illustrated by the taxidermist's description of his creations, particularly in the case of the hybrid bird he invented: "'It has all the silly clumsiness of your pelican, all the solemn want of dignity of your parrot, all the gaunt ungainliness of a flamingo, with all the extravagant chromatic conflict of a mandarin duck'" (24). This enumeration underlines the coexistence of multiple nuances within his composition, which result from his careful selection of fragments that strike or bewilder the observer. As in the short story, this single effect is strengthened by a strong suggestive dimension: readers have to gather the information that is available and have to use their imagination to fill in the gaps in order to engage with the taxidermist's description and recreate a visual representation of his creatures.

28 Furthermore, taxidermy—as described in Wells's fiction—and the genre of the short story are contingent on constant negotiations between financial concerns and artistic value. If the popularisation of the late-Victorian periodical press created new opportunities for short fiction writers to make a living from their work, the publication of their stories nonetheless largely relied on a good understanding of the publishing market in order to meet the editors' demands. In *The Economy of the Short Story*, Winnie Chan draws attention to the fact that

> as the nineteenth century drew to a close, the short story developed in and dominated a literary economy inextricable from the culture its ubiquity engendered. Authors found themselves paid by the word . . ., while, in articles and books, journalistic entrepreneurs offered advice on how most lucratively to 'place' short stories.

29 Chan insists on the complexity of such dynamics, where "commercial success undermines such symbolic rewards as prestige and artistic legitimacy among fellow practitioners in the field." Baldwin has also examined this phenomenon, stating that "art and commerce have perhaps always been at odds, but . . . the two existed in creative tension, and the short story was itself instrumental in overcoming the obstacles placed in its way" (13).

30 The taxidermist's artistic creations also serve a mercantile goal: he talks about them in terms of "business," says they "fetch," and the narrator designates his library as the place where "he plied his trade" (22; 23). His artistic production thus functions within a commercial frame. This mirrors the context in which short stories were published in late-Victorian periodicals: art can "fetch," but to do so, it must adapt to its context of publication. The taxidermist's creations achieve financial worth because he invents what needs to be invented at a particular time and in particular circumstances, as illustrated by one of his declarations: "'Now, I am going to . . . *forge* a complete stuffed

moa. I know a chap out there who will pretend to make the find in a kind of antiseptic swamp, and say he stuffed it at once, as it threatened to fall to pieces'" (23, emphasis in original). The precision of these indications shows that in order to sell his creations, the taxidermist needs to invent a scenario anchored in a specific context, answering the following questions: "where" ("'in a kind of antiseptic swamp'"); "who" ("'a chap out there'"); "how" ("'say he stuffed it at once'") and "why" ("'as it threatened to fall to pieces'"). His work therefore hinges on a list of circumstantial criteria that gives a conditional value to its marketability.

31 In a similar way, Winnie Chan draws attention to the way the success of the short story depends on commercial constraints, as "the genre necessarily participated in the gimmickry involved in attracting readers for the month or week." Within an increasingly competitive publication market, authors and editors needed to ensure that fiction could be valued on a financial level, and such issues could be resolved with what Baldwin has referred to as "formulaic writing," designating the "combined requirements of cheerful tone, sympathetic characters, moral propriety and conventional plot" (93). Moreover, Baldwin highlights the fact that editorial demands (the publishing context) were themselves based on "matters of public morality" (the social context), to which "all classes of magazines except the avant-garde were incredibly sensitive" (91). Nonetheless, "authors found ways to work within these constraints," just like Wells's taxidermist manages to manipulate the limitations of the market to gain from his art (Baldwin 94).

32 Such parallels between the practice of taxidermy and the practice of writing in the late nineteenth century highlight the fact that the author's creative enterprise is meta-fictionally reproduced in his own narrative. This raises the question of whether the act of writing is not also an act of self-creation. Indeed, writing can be regarded as a procreative metaphor whereby authors give birth to a figment of their imagination. For Wells in particular, it seems anchored in a vision where literary creative power is defined in relation to procreativity, as he once declared: "To write a fruitful book . . . is just as much paternity as begetting a son" (*Mankind in the Making*). Like the taxidermist's project, Wells's literary creation is autonomous and asexual by reason of its intellectual conception. His artistic enterprise is also driven by a sense of competition with nature: the author does not seek to duplicate reality in his story, but rather, to generate an alternative world in which fictional characters can evolve. In more prosaic ways too, the publication of "The Triumphs of a Taxidermist" proved instrumental in the empowerment of its creator, since the success of the story allowed Wells to launch his career as a writer. As Baldwin has commented, "Wells is an early instance of the young writer who relied on the income and reputation-building powers of the short story, but who made his fame and fortune from novels" (63). Thus, Wells and his taxidermist alike use artistic creation to reach financial success and a certain social status. The metafictional dimension of the motif of self-creation is not incompatible with Showalter's reading of this motif as a response to increased gender anxieties at the *fin de siècle*. On the contrary, this discursive context not only permeates the taxidermist's deeds and speech, but also shapes Wells's presentation of himself as a writer.

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33 "The Triumphs of a Taxidermist" clearly is the product of an epoch of artistic redefinitions influenced by the unsettling of traditional gender binaries. It conveys late-Victorian gendered perceptions of creation and procreation, and illustrates male writers' attempt to reassert their authority in the realm of fiction to compete with the social realities of female empowerment. If the motif of male self-creation exposes the way artistic creation and gender were tightly interwoven at the turn of the century, it also constitutes a metafictional comment on artistic creation itself. In this way, Wells's story reflects contemporary debates questioning the status of art and artists in relation to the real world. Further examinations of this trope, following on from Showalter's work, would be useful to deepen our understanding of the complex and multifarious interactions of gender discourses and the writing of fiction at the end of the nineteenth century.

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ABSTRACTS

Cet article explore la manière dont texte et contexte interagissent dans la nouvelle "The Triumphs of a Taxidermist" de H.G. Wells, publiée en 1894. Dans ce récit particulièrement bref, le narrateur fait état de sa conversation avec un taxidermiste anonyme qui, au travers de créations chimériques, ambitionne de rivaliser avec la nature. Cette nouvelle fait écho aux discussions visant à redéfinir l'acte de création à la fin du XIXe siècle, ainsi qu'aux inégalités du genre en matière d'accès au pouvoir créatif. Ces débats se rencontrent dans la nouvelle de Wells qui interroge le rapport de l'art au genre, à la réalité, ainsi qu'à son créateur. Cet article propose d'étudier ces connexions à partir du thème de la création masculine autonome, un motif récurrent dans la fiction de la fin de siècle.

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